

## “A Cornerstone Chosen and Precious”

Acts 7:55-60 • Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 • 1 Peter 2:2-10 • John 14:1-14

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Mason, Michigan

May 7, 2023

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Today I'm going to talk about *stones*. You know, those rocks that you find from time to time in your yard or your field. I found this stone in my yard last week, slowly coming up through the dirt. A nice little stone, small enough to hold in your hand. I'm still deciding what to do with it.

There are a *lot* of things you can do with stones. You can use them to build things. You can use them as decorations. Or as markers. Or to cover something up. Or to hold something in place. In the Bible, Jacob used a stone as a pillow, Moses was given two stone tablets, Aaron the priest wore a breastpiece decorated with precious stones, Joshua set up twelve stones in the Jordan River as a memorial to God's mighty deeds, Samuel set up a stone in a special place and called it "Ebenezer," "the stone of help," King Solomon quarried stones to build the temple in Jerusalem, Elijah the prophet built an altar out of twelve stones, and the body of Jesus was laid in a tomb that was shut with a stone.

You can do *all* of those things, and more, with stones. You can also use them as weapons.

There were some crimes in ancient Israel that were punishable by death, and specifically by stoning. If you offered your child as a sacrifice to the pagan god Molech, your punishment would be death by stoning. If you engaged in sorcery, your punishment would be death by stoning. If you blasphemed the Name of the Lord, your punishment would be death by stoning. If you turned a fellow Israelite away from the Lord your God, your punishment would be death by stoning. If you yourself abandoned the Lord and worshiped some other god, your punishment would be death by stoning. If you were a stubborn and rebellious son, a glutton and a drunkard, refusing to heed your parents' discipline, your punishment would be death by stoning. If you committed adultery, your punishment would be death by stoning. Those crimes all resulted in the same unhappy fate: death by stoning.

So it should come as no surprise when we read the story in the Gospel of John about the woman who was caught in adultery, whom the scribes and Pharisees wanted to stone. Nor should it come as surprise when we read the passage in the book of Acts in which Stephen, the deacon and evangelist, is stoned to death. His crime? Blasphemy. He "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'" Those were blasphemous words. Yes, he was seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God, but to say that, to a crowd of faithful Jews – that was incredibly dangerous, incredibly risky. He was trying to persuade them to follow Jesus, but that time, it didn't work. "They covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him." It was the penalty for blasphemy. No one came to his aid, and he died. He became the first Christian martyr, the first person to die giving his

life for Jesus. That happened around the year 34, about four years after Jesus's death and resurrection.

But let's move on and consider some of the more *positive* ways stones have been used in the history of our faith. You are sitting in one of them. This church building was constructed 123 years ago, out of stone. Those of you who have been around for some time know the story; those of you are newer might not. The original plan was to build this church out of *brick*. The pastor who was here at the time – Rev. Zimmerman – had a better idea. Brick would have been easier, but stone was special. The stones used to construct this building were hauled here, by horse, from the fields surrounding Mason. This building was literally constructed from home-grown stones! Hanging in the Memorial Room is a copy of the front page of the *Ingham County News* from April 4, 1901. It tells the story. It also talks about the architecture and the stained glass windows, and it is *definitely* worth a read!

In a broader sense, the scriptures talk about God using the metaphor of a stone, or a rock. “Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress.” Rocks are strong, sturdy, steadfast. They are reliable and dependable. Large, heavy rocks are nearly impossible to move. Fortresses made out of rocks are extremely difficult to break down. Our bodies, in comparison, are pretty weak. Our lives, our souls, are fairly feeble. Look again at the stones that were used to build this church. They've been there for more than 120 years. Those stones are older than any of us ever will be. They will likely outlast us by generations. Such is God, on an even *grand*er scale. God existed before time's beginning and will endure till beyond time's end. There is *nothing* that encompasses God. God's grandeur is *immense*. And yet, God loves each and every single one of us individually. Our relationship to God is *personal*. “In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.... Take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.... My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.... Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.” This is what God does. God, our rock, *redeems* us. God, our rock, *saves* us. God, our rock, *shines* upon us. God, our rock, *delivers* us. God, our rock, *rescues* us. God, *our rock*, is the strong and stable foundation upon which we can build our whole life, and who comes to our aid in our times of need. There is no rock stronger than *God*.

In the New Testament, Jesus is also described as a rock, a stone. There is a lot going on in that passage from 1 Peter that you heard earlier. First and foremost, Jesus Christ is a “living stone.” He was “rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight.” That's a reference to the events of Holy Week – his betrayal, suffering, and death, followed by his resurrection. His coming had been foretold in numerous passages of scripture; Peter quotes three of them here, and every single one of those three includes the “stone” metaphor. First, he quotes Isaiah 28:16: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” Zion was one of the major hills in Jerusalem, and it became a metaphor for the entire city. Jesus wasn't born in Jerusalem, but he died and rose there, and his church was born there. Jesus is not just any stone, but a *cornerstone*, one that supports the whole structure of the building, and he is both “chosen” and “precious.” He can be believed in; he can be *trusted* to hold up your life, the way a cornerstone holds up a building. Next, Peter quotes Psalm 118:22: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner.” It's another metaphor; “the stone that the builders rejected” is a reference to the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders. But on the other side of Easter, the risen Christ becomes the spiritual head of the church, “the very head of the corner.” Finally, Peter quotes Isaiah 8:14: “A stone that makes them stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” Isaiah had been talking about “God with us;” just six verses earlier he had invoked the name “Immanuel.” God had instructed

Isaiah not to walk in the way of unfaithful people, but rather to regard the Lord as holy. “He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over, a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” During his ministry on earth, Jesus presented people with a choice: is he, or is he not, God’s emissary on earth? Many said yes. Many said no. Those that said no stumbled over the stone, metaphorically speaking; they fell over the rock.

So Peter has collected here three key verses from the Hebrew scriptures, all about Jesus, all using the metaphor of “stone” or “rock.” To be perfectly honest, I never noticed that before. How many times have I read that passage, and I never noticed the remarkable trio of passages Peter has collected here! Remember, this was in the days before concordances and computers. Peter connected those “stone” passages all on his own. Or, rather, I should say: I think the Holy Spirit helped him!

There’s one more “stone” reference in this passage from 1 Peter that we need to take note of. Peter talks about Jesus as a “living stone,” a “cornerstone chosen and precious,” the “stone that the builders rejected,” a “stone that makes them stumble.” There’s a lot in this passage about *Jesus*. But there’s also a lot here about *us*. “Come to him,” he says, “and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” This is an *invitation*. An invitation to his readers. An invitation *to us*. This letter is not addressed to just one person, or to just one church, as all of Paul’s letters were. This letter is addressed to *many* Christians in *many* churches in *many* different places. The letter begins: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.” Those places that Peter mentions were all provinces in Asia Minor, what we could call modern Turkey today. There were a *lot* of Christians in those provinces, and they didn’t all go to the same church, and they *definitely* didn’t all know each other. He’s writing a general letter to a general audience, with wisdom and guidance for the faithful living of the Christian life, *wherever* one happens to live. So these words are *easily* applicable to Christians far and wide. These words are for *us*. “Come to him, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a *spiritual* house” – let the Holy Spirit *infuse* your very being! “Be a holy priesthood” – *grow up*, learn how to say “no” to sin in all its various forms, grow more and more into the way of Christ as your life progresses. “Offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” – *do something* with your life that’s *meaningful* to Jesus, *important* to Jesus. Give generously, give *sacrificially*, to the needs of the church, and to the poor and the marginalized. Make your life have a *positive spiritual impact* on everyone around you. Peter continues, a few verses later: “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” *You* are chosen and precious in God’s sight, just like Jesus. *You* have been destined for greatness, just like Jesus. *You* have been called to live a different kind of life than the world around you, just like Jesus. *You* have been invited to be part of a very special family of faith. *You* have been charged with the task of sharing the good news about God’s grace and God’s love, for *you* have been rescued and delivered by God from the spiritual forces of darkness ... just like Jesus.

To put that another way: *Jesus* was a stone, a very special stone, a *living* stone, a stone *chosen* and *precious*. And *you* have been invited and beckoned and called to become *living stones* too.

Well, what are you waiting for? Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Everything you do from this point on is either going to bear witness to your special identity, or it is going to stand in conflict with it. How are you going to live up to your calling to be a *living stone* for Jesus Christ?

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